Can you tell a person's gender by their video game avatar?

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A sexy wood elf with pointy ears. A hulking ogre with blue skin. An intimidating heroine with a buxom breastplate. When it comes to computer games, players can choose to be anyone or anything. But gamers don't always mask their true identities with online avatars.

According to a new study by researchers at Concordia University, Colorado State University, Syracuse University, Hofstra University and the University of Toronto, a male gamer who chooses to play as a female character will still display signs of his true gender.

In the study, which was recently published in *Information, Communication and Society*, researchers examined the online behaviour of 375 participants as they played a custom-built quest in World of Warcraft—a massive multi-player game set in a fantasy world where players battle warlords, dragons, demons and each other to gain strength and abilities. The investigators' goal? To see if gender differences in online behaviour align with the offline social norms that govern "appropriate" behaviour for men and women.

Twenty-three per cent of the study's male participants chose avatars of the opposite gender, and seven per cent of its female participants did the same. As they played, their online movement, chat and clicks on interactive objects were recorded.

"Avatars can convey a player's sense of humour, displeasure, intrigue and interest through cues like gestures, movement and language, which
can reveal real-life identity," says Mia Consalvo, one of the study's authors and a professor in Concordia's Department of Communication Studies.

"We looked at things like language use and online movement to see if, among those who played a character of the opposite gender, a player's real-life gender would be revealed."

The researchers found that male gamers with female avatars used more emotional phrases and employed smile emoticons more often than those with male avatars. They were also more likely to choose an attractive avatar.

It was with respect to movement that the male gamers with female avatars ultimately gave themselves away: they moved backwards more often and stayed further away from the group than women playing with female avatars.

"Movement is less conscious than chat, so it can be an easier 'tell' for offline gender," says Consalvo, who also holds a Canada Research Chair in Game Studies and Design.

Men playing with a female avatar also jumped an average of 116 more times than their female counterparts. There could be a number of reasons for this seemingly odd finding:

- Gender switchers might be trying to signal their offline gender by jumping more than they would otherwise.
- Because men sometimes use female avatars to get attention or kinder treatment from other players, jumping may be a move to attract attention.
- Jumping may be a way to use the avatar for entertainment rather than for the more "serious" work of fighting in-game enemies.
Frequent jumps may show that the gamer intends the avatar to play a less serious role in the game.

Ultimately, the study has implications for gender theorists and gamers alike.

"Our findings support feminist theories suggesting that although gender is a powerful social category, there is a range of ways it can be performed," Consalvo says.

"Men may not necessarily try to mask their offline gender when they use a female avatar, but our study shows they do reinforce idealized notions of feminine appearance and communication."

Provided by Concordia University


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